Symposium: Conceptions of Historical Time: Looking Beyond Time on the Clock

Introduction: Complexities of Historical Time

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.898124

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Virginia Woolf once noted that "there is an extra-ordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind" (Cited in Gaddis 2002: 19). She meant to underscore the complexity of understanding time as it combines objective, mechanical elements with contextual and subjective ones. Political science has come a long way from the days when scholars mistook studying something that occurred in the past for studying actual temporal dynamics (Sewell 1996; Bartolini 1993); political science now employs myriad temporal concepts that permit analyzing time in all its complexity. This symposium takes an inventory of some of these concepts in order to push beyond the current consensus that time matters and draw greater attention to different ways in which time matters in our analysis of social phenomena.

Calendric Time and Its Limitations

The starting point for exploring what Pitrim Sorokin and Robert Merton called "social time," on which social scientists focus, is the time mapped out by the calendar and the clock—the most basic, objective but also thinnest conception of time (Sorokin and Merton 1937). Calendars and clocks have long been the basic measurement instrument of time. Ever since societies began following the celestial motions in the sky, they have devised various timekeeping devices (i.e., sundials, clocks) and time-recording schemes (i.e., calendars, chronicles). All these efforts share in common attempts to ground time in the celestial cycles and to find solutions for the "fact that neither the number of days in a lunar cycle nor the lunar cycles in a year are nice round numbers" (Falk 2010: 31). While societies differed in how their calendars scheduled leap years or varied the length of months, they all share in common efforts to benchmark time against an external, physical, and hence objective celestial reality. The calendar's ability to measure time was subsequently refined by the invention of clocks that gave structure to the time within a single day. The refinement, incidentally, originated in monasteries and served monks to more reliably coordinate their common prayers (Mumford 1934: 12–13).

This calendric time and time on the clock thus are ontologically the least ambiguous and epistemologically most fundamental forms of time. But, they also are "empty," "uniform, homogeneous…[and] shorn of qualitative variations" (Sorokin and Merton 1937: 621, 623). They are, in short, of limited use for analyzing social phenomena. The cultural critic Lewis Mumford recognized this point when he argued that the clock "disassociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences: the special world of science. There is relatively little foundation for this belief in common human experience" (Mumford 1934: 15–16). Sorokin, Merton, and Mumford's point, shared by historians and historically-minded social scientists, is that calendric time is too thin to meaningfully represent many complex social phenomenon, temporal dynamics, or history for short.

What then is historical or social time and how is it capable of adequately capturing temporal dynamics? As the following contributions will show, there are some promising but also varying answers to this question.

Historical Time and Its Variations

On the grander scale, the break with, or maybe rebellion against, thin and calendric time began "when men began to think of the passage of time not in terms of natural processes—the cycle of seasons, human life span—but of a series of specific events in which men are consciously involved and which they can consciously influence. History, says Burckhardt, is the 'break nature causes by the awakening of consciousness'" (Carr 1961: 157). On a smaller, social science scale, skepticism towards thin, calendric notions of time is almost as old as social science itself and particularly strong among scholars interested in political development. Such scholars long have emphasized that many political phenomena lack the uniformity and the clock-like properties of physical phenomena because they are historically situated, interdependent across time, and, thus, subject to complex temporal dynamics (Pierson 2000, 2003; Skocpol 1984; Katznelson 2003). They consequently have emphasized that historical time requires the reconfiguration of the fixed, independent and mechanical units of chronological time into more varied, interdependent, and complex forms of time that are better capable of rendering legible the temporal complexities experienced by individuals and societies. These efforts have given rise to a multitude of conceptions of time and thus require us to think of time not as a singular, but as a plural (Zerubavel 2003; Kern 1983).

The following contributions are meant as a first step to bring together some conceptualizations of historical time that currently are used in social science. All these conceptions can be thought of as refinements of two basic core elements that are found in any study of political development. Studying political development is in its crudest version a form of chronicling, of reporting the mere temporal order of events. Such chronologies are crude in the sense that they correspond to the stereotype of history as "one damn thing after another" that pays little attention to the continuities between the chronicled events. Such chronologies are to historical analysis what the metronome is to music—it just measures the beat of time. A slightly more advanced form of historical analysis concerns itself with continuities and discontinuities. It clusters time into moments of change and no change, into episodes of transience and durability, or into moments of critical junctures

and subsequent path dependencies.

The following contributions build on and, in many ways, refine this dual concern with chronology and continuities and discontinuities by thinking more systematically about starting and end points and the temporal interactions among various units of analysis. The contributions in this symposium are ordered to go from the ones with least to the most complex treatment of time. Here is a quick preview.

Stefano Bartolini uses the franchise expansion in Europe to talk about timing, tempo, and reversals. *Timing* compares the starting points and permits differentiating the order in which and how closely in time identical events occurred. *Tempo* compares the time elapsed between the starting and end point of a phenomenon to measure how quickly or slowly a phenomenon unfolded. *Reversals*, in turn, capture instances of temporary change where the endpoint returns to the starting point.

Jason Wittenberg's study of post-communist Eastern Europe confronts him with the challenge of explaining varying patterns of democratic consolidation after an allegedly uniform and shared communist experience. He and other scholars have unraveled this erstwhile paradox by drawing attention to the varying legacies left by both the communist and pre-communist periods. Legacies thus capture temporal dynamics in which part of a phenomenon ceases to formally exist while informally continuing to exert important and oftentimes very long-term influence.

Tim Luecke's focus on generations echoes on a smaller scale Jason Wittenberg's analysis of legacies. The concept of generation establishes a bridge between events unfolding on calendric time and the biological life cycles of individuals. It stipulates that some events along calendric time are more important than others and that individuals are more socializable at earlier than later stages of life. And so, generations can form when a cohort of young people experience together a particularly important set of historical events.

Marcus Kreuzer and Vello Pettai analyze how the organizational continuities and discontinuities of political parties affect the overall continuity of a party system. This interaction has been long studied and described in terms of varying rates of institutionalization or consolidation. They introduce a new measure of effective party system age which is capable of not only quantitatively measuring the aggregate durability of party systems but also differentiating distinct patterns of development.

Philippe Blanchard combines discussion about conceptions of time with particular methodologies for studying them. He describes how sociologists have developed sequence analysis to systematically study the interaction of three temporal dimensions: timing, order, and duration. His contribution manages to efficiently combine a synopsis about the key elements of sequence analysis with some illustrations of what insights it is capable of generating into better understanding temporal dynamics.

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The Temporal Dynamics of the Franchise Expansion: Timing, Tempo, and Reversals

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The development of political rights, and in particular, the right to vote, was the end result of a long historical process going back to the eighteenth century and was rooted in the development of civic rights (Marshall 1964; Bendix 1978). [...] The development of voting rights should not be seen as linear development of previous and perquisite rights of expressions, association, and opposition. [...] It is difficult to find a common dimension along which to rank-order national cases. However, I distinguish cases along an *early versus late* [timing] dimension, a *sudden versus gradual* [tempo] dimension, and a *continuity* dimension (with or without important reversals). [...][1]

Timing/Earliness

How many individuals were allowed to vote during the nineteenth century is divided into four periods: 1830–1880, 1881–1917, 1918–1944, and 1945–1975. [...] In the 1848–1880 period, three countries stand out as early comers to relatively